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The Four Corners

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The Four Corners

Our farm is on the four corners. My old lady's got nothing better to do than sit around the porch waiting for accidents to happen. And they do. Fender-benders, side swipes, nose-to-noses, minor head-ons. Once in a while there's a real lambasting. Because the way the roads go, it's usually into the passenger's side so it's no big deal unless someone is along for the ride.

"Arlene," I say, "how can you sit around like this just waiting for accidents?" I hear my voice but don't recognize it in the heat. It clots in my throat as if the words were blood.

Her name's Arlene but she always wanted a name like Cherokee, something with a little pizzazz. My name's Milton, but she doesn't call me by my name. She just says you or calls me by my last name, Wylie. She says I should be named Slocum because I take so long.

"It's about all there's left to do since you stopped loving me," she says. "Since you started chasing that little chippy around."

The little chippy she's referring to is a girl I knew in the past, long before we got married. Her father was a pilot and she was smooth as a wing. She was like a little foreign sports car with rack-and-pinion steering in her hips. Acceleration on demand. She had green eyes and sometimes she'd make them go like the dashboard lights. She owned red underpants and she'd show them to me. But that's in the past.

Hell, I knew that woman before my old lady was even born, and why not. I'm past forty. I've been around. But my old lady don't know nothing. She's only twenty-five. How can you know anything when you're only twenty-five?

It's her way, though, to throw shit like that up in my face. We

got enough trouble. We're farmers. We buy retail and sell wholesale. Me, I say let sleeping dogs lie, don't kick a man when he's down.

"I suppose I could strip the piano," she says.

It's a job she's been talking about doing for a long time. But it's only talk. She gets up and stretches. I light a smoke and watch her housedress rise above her knees. It keeps going until it gets to where her rump starts and just then she drops her arms and the hem falls back down like the iron curtain.

She goes over to the porch railing where the sun is. The housedress is threadbare and I can see right through it as the light pours around her hips and from between her legs. She looks over her shoulder at me and then goes down the step to where the spigot is. She turns it on and leads the hose to the hedge that lines our corner. Dousing it a good one, she works her way to the lilacs that have grown to embrace the stop sign on our corner.

She's down there watering her garden and it will bear her the fruit of wreckage. I tell her this.

"Go to hell," she says.

One night I caught her out there, lugging five-gallon buckets across the road to water the sumac and poplar growing up around the other stop signs. There are four and she waters every one of them. If you asked her, she'd deny she ever did it, but I saw her.

I wish she wouldn't douse those signs because it's an awful waste of water and it seems like it hasn't rained in three years. I'm afraid the well will go dry and we'll be up the old shit creek without a paddle.

A few years back an animal fell into the well and I had to pump it and then go down inside and dredge out the muck. Thirty-two feet of laid-up stone. Let me tell you mistah man, that was an

experience. When you are down there, the air is cold and the opening at the top doesn't look any bigger than a fifty-cent piece. All that for a dead possum and then alls I could think was, how in hell do you know if those things are really dead or not. If it's really good at being a possum, there's no way you can tell if it's dead. Even if the god damn thing were on fire or flatter than a pancake in the road. It might be just one real good possum.

Anyways, I'm down in that well and she starts dropping stuff on me, acorns, bolts and D-cell batteries.

"Ain't so wily now, are you," she kept saying. "Ain't so wily now, are you?"

I can't imagine what she was thinking but it gave a whole new meaning to a cold day in hell.

Now I just pump the well and chlorine it. Chlorox bleach will do and when it goes dry I shoot it with the ought-six and it opens a new vein. Works every time and that's just fine with me.

She's really pouring it on that lilac bush. I try to get her to take up a hobby, chair caning or rug braiding, something that could bring in a little pin money. I tell her that.

"Go to hell," she says and shoots me with the hose. It feels like something from the sky and then goes dry just as quick.

I can hear the pump kick on. Now it'll have to work overtime to keep up because the cows will be off their feed soon and want a drink.

"You've got to shut down that hose," I say, but she doesn't. She keeps watering the hedges and the lilacs.

The sound of that pump grates on me worse than a dentist's drill. Women don't get bothered. They have no touch with machines, something men are born with. Men can feel the high wail of RPMs, see that red line in their mind's eye. They cringe at the

dry throaty hum of a pump sucking air or begin to shake with the vibration of water hammer. Alls women know is how to shift, accelerate, brake and flush. Some don't even know how to shift. She doesn't. She won't have a stick.

Past the porch rail, there's only half a sun left and that's going fast. The corn's burned up in the fields. It dented early and wasn't waist high. If we'd been of lesser stuff we wouldn't have made it this far. The feed can't last but we both knew when we got together that love's a hard luck kind of thing. She was coming off a man who used to slap her around and I was coming off a woman who needed to be slapped around. That one shed me off like an old coat. So me and the old lady got married and took on a mortgage that would choke a Rockefeller.

So here we are, me sitting on the porch in my socks and her watering the hedge. Here we are doling out the winter feed in September while the cows wither and their milk dries up, waiting for the young punk from the Federal Land Bank to call in our note, to sell us out, and shut off the lights. And right now with this weather we'd be like to spit on the sun.

She comes back to the porch, her hose trailing behind her, her legs wet and beads of sweat on her upper lip and forehead.

"The pump's running," she says.

"I know. The cows are at their water bowls."

"I have figured out what we are to do," she says, standing in front of me with her hands on her hips and one knee bent forward just a little. I try to listen, but even in this light it's plain as the nose on my face she isn't wearing anything under that housedress.

"Jewish lightning," she says and when she sees I don't get it, she says, "We'll burn the barn and collect the insurance."

I laugh at her. I can't believe she'd be that stupid. I know what burning barns are like. I've been in them. Timbers lit up like phosphor, breakers and fuses going off like gunshots and cows waiting to die. Burn a hank of hair sometime. See what it smells like. Multiply that smell a million times and you'll know something. Not much, but something.

"We'll burn the barn," she says again, but I don't say anything. I only sit there sucking the nicotine off my fingers.

Our first date was to a wedding. Arlene's sister was getting married in Windsor, Vermont, to a guy she wrote to in prison. He'd been her pen pal when she was a high school senior. Arlene talked me into driving her because her Olds was laid up in the shop. An engine mount had busted free and the thing rode like a cement mixer. So I said, what the hell.

We drove two hours on the interstate and I was having trouble with the gas pedal sticking. She liked that. I'd lift my foot clear off the gas and we'd surge ahead. She liked that a lot, the sinking feeling she got every time it happened.

"My old man had a car like this," she said. "It was a Charger. He had the ass end jacked up and he could lay rubber in every gear."

I smiled and nodded. The last time my car swallowed the old pumpkin, I lost the muffler. Eighty-six bucks and a bunch of grief.

"He had a standing bet you couldn't snatch a fifty off the dash when he punched it."

"Cars are transportation," I told her and she nodded like I'd just said something smart.

So we got to the wedding and the bride was wearing white,

even though she had a shelf in front of her that'd carry a dish drainer. It was one of those things.

And then a little while after that, when me and the old lady got married, some little chippy from her side of the family came up to me and said, "It seems more like a funeral than a wedding. I don't mean people are sad, it's just all the flowers and the way people are dressed. I guess I say stupid things. It's that I just went to a funeral and I was thinking about it. By the way, are you a friend of the bride or the groom?"

I guess I should've known something was up then, but I didn't.

We hit the whiskey and gin pretty good that first night. Myself now, I'm a big man. I can pound them down when the urge hits, but she kept right up, one for one, six for six. She likes her gin. She says when it's good it's like biting into a Popsicle stick.

We woke up the next morning in Burlington and the sky was bloodshot, the sun a color I'd never seen before. She opened the curtains in the motel and stood there without any clothes on.

She said to the window, "I dreamed I woke up in the night and said to you this must be what valleys feel like. And you said, what? And I said they get to be next to mountains."

Then she says, "Jesus Christ, Slocum, you about broke me in half on that last one."

"Well," I said, "tender or not, the valley and the mountain had better get back to the four corners because we got a load of cows getting in tomorrow."

We rented cows from out of Texas for the first few years. Every trailer load came in with shipping fever and then all the rest would get it. Heavy breathing, raspy cough and blowing snot. We used a triple sulfa I.V., but I tell you, the best cure is death.

Now I wish we'd gotten into veal calves.

"Wishes ain't worth shit," she says. "We'll burn the barn."

I shake my head. She has that look in her eye. She wants to burn the barn, I can tell. I'll have to keep an eye on her.

"What about the woman up the lane?" I say.

"That old woman? She's a fossil. She's been around since the earth cooled."

I like the woman up the road. She's about the only one I haven't been accused of running around with.

She told me a real whopper once. She said, "My cousin's name is Richard Frost but we call him Jack. He sent me three tarantulas from Arizona. He's a real animal nut. But he didn't send any feed and I didn't know what tarantulas eat. First the two ate the one and then one of the ones that's left eats the other one and then that one dies. It took forever. I watched it all. What I don't understand is that the one left should've been three times as big as it was, but it wasn't. As far as names go, Jack Frost is nothing. My first husband's name was Adam Baum. He died in World War II. It's just like *deja vu* isn't it."

So when I got back to the house I told this story and my old lady says the woman is senile. She says it like it's a dirty word.

This is all she says because she doesn't like the old woman. She's got it in her head the old woman is trying to get us to kill her. Sometimes late at night when we come home from the gin mill, either alone or together, that old woman is standing in the road. We've both almost hit her, almost plowed right into her.

So once I said to the old woman, "Why do you get in the road whenever we come home?"

"It's because when I'm walking I always wait to hear a car coming and then I go like hell, but these legs are old. I do it that way because I'm afraid of getting hit by the one I don't hear. They

say you never hear the one that gets you and I don't want that to happen to me."

The old woman spies on us. She's got a pair of binoculars up there and she pretends she's looking at her mailbox. It sits on the same board next to ours. Her mailbox has a little cup attached to the door. There's a red ball in the cup and when the mailman opens the door, the ball falls out and hangs by a string. She uses those binoculars to spy on us. I think that's why some nights, the old lady drags me out of bed and onto the porch, just to give the woman a thrill. The old lady will do a regular strip tease and then look out.

But not since it hasn't rained. I miss those times. I counted on her not to fall apart. But in a way she has. She's willing to say the things I only think.

"Listen," my old lady says. "We burn the barn and we could clear sixty or seventy thousand."

The way I figure it, it's more like fifty-eight or so, but I don't say anything.

"If we don't burn the barn, or even if we do I want to get a glider for this porch," she says moving inside her housedress, stroking the porch rail. I count five buttons and think how it's all that's left to do and then she sits down beside me.

"My uncle told me how to do it," she says. "Diesel fuel and fertilizer. It's called a farmer's bomb."

"We don't burn diesel," I say, trying to open a button with one finger, but it seems to be stuck.

"Then we can do a Mrs. O'Leary's cow number. A lantern in the bullpen."

"No," I say. "He won't read by anything but 100-watt GE

softlights. He told me himself."

"Listen," she says. "They sock it to us pretty good on this insurance racket."

"That's because we live so far out of town. When we get ahead a little, I'll have a hydrant put in and that will cut the premium. We'll dig an artesian well and put in a submersible pump."

"I'm saying it's time to collect."

"Now you listen," I say standing up, wanting to raise my hand. "Those volunteers could get here and they'd see right through all your little methods. Some of those guys are farmers, too. And besides, what about the old woman?"

She's laughing at me so hard she bends at the waist and holds her hands to her chest. When she straightens up a couple of buttons have come undone. That leaves three.

"Don't worry about those guys," she says. "They're a bunch of incompetents. One time they had a chicken barbecue and burnt down their own firehouse."

I hadn't heard that story.

"My old man. He'd do it. He'd do anything for a buck. Last I heard he was in some service contract scam. Selling the contracts and then disappearing with the service."

"Your old man ain't shit," I say.

"Maybe that man used to slap me around," she says, her eyes on me, "but he knew how to love me too."

With that she gets up and goes in the house and I get up and go to the barn.

The cows are settling in for the night. It's cool in the barn. I keep them in because the pastures are burnt down to brown stubble, not being more than tinder and the brook is dry. These are all my

Holsteins. Fifty of them, all second and third generations, black and white and even the young move like royalty, slow and graceful. I sweep in the mangers, stopping to hold their heads and feel the bottom jaws making circles, working crossways against the top one as they chew their cud. These cows have the blood but the feed is poor and you can't live off love.

I say that out loud and it's my voice, my words. You can't live off love and expect to come out alive.

I stop next to the panel box outside the milkhouse and have a smoke. Underneath I can see where the conduit has come loose and dropped four inches. Bright, copper wires shine up at me from where the electrician stripped them a little too low when he wired the barn. I take a broom handle and push them together.

Another cow has aborted. The fetus lays in the gutter, the size of a walnut. Another one is in heat. She's the one I've been waiting for. She's in silent heat, no crying, no strings of clear mucus. I let it pass.

We'll burn the barn, she said to me when we were on the porch. How stupid, I wonder, can one woman be?

I check the bred cows, those six or seven months along. I make a fist and gently bump into their right sides near the flank. I feel a hard lump come back at me. These are the calves.

So I shut off the lights and the barn goes dark except for the glow I made around the panel box. It's green and white and I can see it growing with heat.

Outside it's dark. I stop under the black hull of the night and try to smell rain. I think of the moon pulling tides and how strong it must be to do such a thing. It brings tears to my eyes, because what I've just done with those wires is like a marriage vow or a funeral service.

In the house there's a big puddle on the floor next to the piano. It's eating away at the finish. It's boiling and the fumes are rising and they stink like a cross between burning rubber and drain cleaner. She's in the kitchen and she's naked to the world. She's got the cat under the faucet and it's yowling and screaming because it doesn't like the drenching it's getting.

I go up to her and move in from behind, reaching around her body and that's when I start to burn. My hands and my arms, as if the dogs of hell are eating my flesh. It's like a friggin' blast furnace on my skin. She's laughing. She's bending at the waist, bumping me with her hind end and laughing. She's telling me she was going to strip the piano and spilled a pan of Strip-EZE all over herself so she ripped off her housedress and while she was doing that the damn cat walked through it.

But I don't stop. The cat keeps screaming and scratching her arms and chest and the backs of my hands. She keeps laughing and I keep going while out in the barn, the green and white luminous light grows from the bridge arcing between the two wires. The heat in between is at ten thousand degrees and climbing. Copper is melting.

I think how if I'd touched it, the electricity could have entered my hand, traveled my skin and blown out my kneecap or my heart. I think I can even smell the smoke. I take hold of her, my hands on her hot flesh and we go at it like that, doing the slow burn, waiting for the fire wall to cave in.